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Kobon language

Kobon (pronounced [xombon], [k͡xombon] or [kʰombon]) is a language of Papua New Guinea. It has somewhere around 90–120 verbs.

Kobon has a Pandanus language, spoken when harvesting karuka.[4]

Contents

Kobon	
Native to	Papua New Guinea
Region	Madang Province, Middle Ramu District, and Western Highlands Province on Kaironk River in lower Jimi River area north of Mt. Hagen
Native speakers	10,000 (2007)[1] 4,000 monolinguals (2007?)[2]
Language family	Trans–New Guinea - Madang - Rai Coast–Kalam - Kalam - Kalam–Kobon **Kobon**
Language codes	
ISO 639-3	kpw
Glottolog	kobo1249 (http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/kobo1249)[3]

Geographic distribution

Kobon is spoken in Madang Province and Western Highlands Province, north of Mount Hagen.

Phonology

Vowels

Monophthongal vowels are /i e ɨ ə a o u/, diphthongs are /ai̯ au̯/. /i/ and /u/ may be [jɪ] and [wʊ~ʍʊ] word-initially. /ɨ/ ([ɨ~ɯ]) is written ⟨ü⟩ and /ə/ ([ɜ~ɵ~ɪ]) is written ⟨ö⟩.

Only /i a u/ and the diphthongs occur word-initially, apart from the quotative particle, which is variably /a~e~o~ö/. /e o/ occur syllable-initially within a word. All vowels (including the diphthongs) occur syllable-medially (in CVC syllables), syllable-finally and at the ends of words. Many vowel sequences occur, including some with identical vowels.

Consonants

Kobon distinguishes an alveolar lateral /l/, a palatal lateral /ʎ/, a subapical retroflex lateral flap /ɭ/ (ĭ̥), and a fricative trill /ɽ/, though the frication on the latter is variable.

Kobon consonants and their allophones[5]

nasal	m ⟨m⟩	n ⟨n⟩	ɲ ⟨ñ⟩	ŋ ⟨ŋ⟩	
lenis obstruent	mb [p~b~mb~mpʰ] ⟨b⟩	nd [tʰ~d~nd~ntʰ] ⟨d⟩	ndʑ [dʑ~ɲdʑ~ɲtɕ] ⟨j⟩	ŋg [k~g~ɣ~ŋg~ŋkʰ] ⟨g⟩	
fortis obstruent	f [f~ɸ~β~v~ʋ~p̄] ⟨p⟩	s ⟨s⟩	tɕ [tɕ~dʑ] ⟨c⟩	x [kʰ~kx~x~ɣ] ⟨k⟩	
lateral		l [l~ɫ] ⟨l⟩	ʎ ⟨ɭ⟩		
rhotic		r [r̥~ɾ~r~ɽ̊~ɽ~r] ⟨r⟩	ɺ̆ [l~ɺ~t̆] ⟨ɭ⟩		
approximant	w ⟨w⟩		j ⟨y⟩		ħ [h] ⟨h⟩

Voiced obstruents may be prenasalized after vowels, depending on the preceding consonant, and are voiceless word-initially. Liquids other than /ʎ/ tend toward <u>final devoicing</u>. For example, final /d/ is [ntʰ] and final /l/ tends to [ɫ]. (/w/ and /j/ do not occur in final position, while nasals and /ʎ/ retain voicing.) Voiceless consonants other than /s/ and /h/ are optionally voiced between vowels.

⟨ɭ⟩ is sublaminal retroflex. It has been described as a lateral flap, [◌].

All consonants occur syllable initially, though /ŋ/ only occurs word-initially in a single mimetic word. All consonants but /h j w/ occur syllable- and word-finally. Clusters occur in many (C)VC.CV(C) words, as well as initially in a handful of mostly monosyllabic CCV(C) words. Attested initial clusters are /bɽ, xɽ, fr, xl/.

Kobon positional allophones

	word-initially	**intervocalically**	**word-finally**
⟨r⟩	r̥~ɾ̥	ɾ~r	r̥~ɾ̥~ɽ~ɽ̊~ɾ~r
⟨ɭ⟩	ɺ		l~ɺ~t̆
⟨l⟩	l		ɫ~l
⟨k⟩	kʰ~k̠x~x also ɣ intervocalically		
⟨p⟩	ɸ~f	β~ʋ[6] (occas. v)	ɸ~p̄
⟨c⟩	t͡ɕ	t͡ɕ~d͡ʑ	t͡ɕ
⟨g⟩	g~k	g~ɣ, ŋ͡g	ŋ͡kʰ
⟨j⟩	d͡ʑ	d͡ʑ, ɲd͡ʑ	ɲt͡ɕ
⟨d⟩	d	d, n̪d	n̪tʰ (occas. tʰ)
⟨b⟩	b (occas. p)	b, m̪b	m͡pʰ

Intervocalically, the lenis obstruents are oral [b d d͡ʑ g~ɣ] when a nasal or another lenis obstruent occurs in the preceding syllable, and are prenasalized [mb nd ɲd͡ʑ ŋg] otherwise, with some variability after /h/. They are often oral in a medial cluster after another consonant. Otherwise the allophones in the table above are largely in <u>free variation</u>.

Grammar

Kobon is a subject–object–verb language.

Singular, dual, and plural are distinguished in personal pronouns and kinship terminology.

Like the other Kalam languages, Kobon is famous for having a very small number of verbs—perhaps less than 120 for the entire language. These verbs are combined with nouns into phrases with specific meanings, much as one says "have dinner" rather than "dine" in English.

This makes for an interesting window into semantics. One might expect that with a very limited set of verbs, their meanings would be quite general as *have, do, be* and *go* are in English. To a certain extent this is really the case, as there is for example only one verb of perception. That is, the same verb is used for *see, hear, taste, smell, feel* (both physically and emotionally), *think*, and *understand* (compare with "I see" for "I understand" in English). Another verb is used for making sound, whether it's speaking, singing, praying, crying, twigs breaking, rocks clattering, or water gurgling. However, some Kobon verbs are quite specific. There is one exception for *sound*, for example: there's a specific verb for calling a pig. There are also three verbs of *pouring*, depending on whether the thing being poured is solid, liquid, or food; and there is even a verb that means *to quarter a cassowary*.

Writing system

Kobon has been written in the Latin alphabet for over 30 years. The special letters ꞁ and ꞁ are used for the subapical retroflex lateral flap and palatal lateral, respectively.

> *a b c d e g h i j k l ꞁ ꞁ m n ñ ŋ o ö p r s u ü w y*

5–15% of Kobon speakers are literate.

References

1. Kobon (https://www.ethnologue.com/18/language/kpw/) at *Ethnologue* (18th ed., 2015)
2. Kobon language (https://www.ethnologue.com/16/show_language/kpw) at *Ethnologue* (16th ed., 2009)
3. Hammarström, Harald; Forkel, Robert; Haspelmath, Martin, eds. (2017). "Kobon" (http://glottol og.org/resource/languoid/id/kobo1249). *Glottolog 3.0*. Jena, Germany: Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History.
4. Pawley, Andrew (1992). "Kalam Pandanus Language: An Old New Guinea Experiment in Language Engineering". In Dutton, Tom E.; Ross, Malcolm; Tryon, Darrell (eds.). *The Language Game: Papers in Memory of Donald C. Laycock*. Pacific Linguistics Series C. **110**. Canberra: Department of Linguistics, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University. pp. 313–334. ISBN 0-85883-400-6. ISSN 0078-7558 (https://www.worldcat.org/issn/ 0078-7558). OCLC 222981840 (https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/222981840).
5. Davies (1981: 215 ff)
6. Word medially next to a consonant, ⟨p⟩ is [ɸ] or [β] depending on the voicing of that consonant.

- John Davies, 1981. *Kobon*. *Lingua* Descriptive Series 3.